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C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 03 BEIRUT 001731

SIPDIS

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SUBJECT: LEBANON: SLEIMAN AFFIRMS: NO MILITARY DEAL WITH
IRAN

REF: A. (A) BEIRUT 1677

[1](#)B. (B) BEIRUT 1698

Classified By: Ambassador Michele J. Sison for reasons 1.4 (b), (d)

SUMMARY

[1](#)1. (C) President Michel Sleiman told the Ambassador that during his late November trip to Tehran, Iran did not offer military assistance to Lebanon and he did not ask for any. He said he detected disagreement between Iran and Syria over Syria's contacts with Israel. He was negative about advancing Lebanese-Israeli contacts in the near term, noting that he, PM Siniora and Speaker Berri agreed on that issue. Sleiman confirmed that he was now playing a leading role in foreign policy and had delivered a message in Syria, Saudi Arabia, Iran and to Arab ambassadors in Germany that those countries should deal with Lebanon through the state, particularly the presidency, not just through proxies. When asked if Syria and Lebanon would name Ambassadors by year's end, he responded "I hope."

[1](#)2. (C) On politics, Sleiman viewed positively efforts to create an independent list of candidates for 2009 elections but said he would wait one-two months before deciding the difficult question of associating himself with such a list. He explained two other options that might be available to him: one, obtain agreement that the president name one-third of the next cabinet to act as a moderating force in the new government and, two, form a "president's bloc" in the parliament after, not before, the election among winning candidates who are interested in allying with him. Sleiman will see visiting former president Carter on December 10 and Codel Ackerman on December 13. End Summary.

IRAN DID NOT OFFER MILITARY ASSISTANCE

[1](#)3. (C) Ambassador and DCM met with President Michel Sleiman at his office in Baaba Palace on December 6. Since Ambassador's last conversation with him, Sleiman had traveled to Iran November 24-26 and Germany December 2-4.

[1](#)4. (C) Sleiman took time to carefully explain his Iran trip (ref B), pointing out where he had pushed back on the Iranians' messages. He told the Ambassador firmly that Iran did not make an offer of military assistance and Sleiman did

not request any. He detected divergence between Iran and Syria over the latter's indirect contacts with Israel. All of his Iranian interlocutors expressing strong negative views toward Israel. In response to them, Sleiman said he deliberately referred to the Arab Peace Initiative as expressed in the Beirut Declaration of 2002, which acknowledges that Israel has a role in the region. Ambassador told the president we had noticed his words in the joint press conference with Iranian president Ahmadinejad; he said he deflected the Iranians' desire for a joint statement.

15. (C) Sleiman said he stressed the importance of the Lebanese state institutions in response to the Iranians' strong expressions of support for "the resistance" -- Hizballah -- in Lebanon. His message, he said, was that a strong Lebanese state can support everybody, including the resistance, while a weak state cannot support everybody.

CONTACT WITH ISRAEL? NOT NOW.

16. (C) Ambassador asked Sleiman about prospects for indirect Lebanese talks with Israel, noting a recent media story on that subject and expressions of support for the idea by March 14 figures Amine Gemayel and Mosbah Ahdab. "We should wait" Sleiman replied, saying that the opposition to such a move was still too strong in Lebanon. If Syria makes progress with Israel, then maybe some form of Lebanon-Israel contact would be possible, he said. He also was very negative about bilateral contacts, saying any contact should be through a

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Madrid or Annapolis-type process that addresses region-wide issues. He noted that Israel has so far not cooperated on demarcating the Lebanese-Israeli border. Sleiman made a point of saying that PM Siniora, Speaker Berri and he were in agreement on the issue of contact with Israel. (Note: in an earlier meeting with Defense Minister Elias Murr, ref A, Murr told the Ambassador that Sleiman had a plan to appoint him as Foreign Minister in the next cabinet if it looked as if Lebanon's relations with Israel might advance).

17. (C) Ambassador noted that Sleiman was taking on a larger role in Lebanon's foreign policy. Sleiman confirmed that, saying that the president should "set the vision" for Lebanon's foreign relations. His next trip will be to Jordan on December 14 (Codel Ackerman will see Sleiman the day before).

18. (C) The local press highlighted Sleiman's statement to a meeting of Arab Ambassadors during his December 2-4 visit to Germany that foreign countries should interact with Lebanon through the institutions of the state, particularly the presidency. That was widely interpreted as a slap at opposition Christian leader Michel Aoun, who at the same time was receiving red carpet treatment in Syria. Sleiman told the Ambassador that he had passed a similar message during his visits to Syrian president Assad, Saudi King Abdallah and Iranian president Ahmadinejad (but not in France, the U.S. or other countries that did not need to be told that, he added). "Many in Lebanon have relations with other countries, but those have to be for the benefit of Lebanon", Sleiman said.

PLEASED THAT SYRIA CALLS SHEBA'A LEBANESE

9.(C) "I hope" Syria and Lebanon will name Ambassadors by year's end, Sleiman responded when the Ambassador asked, saying he plans to raise the issue when he phones Syrian president Assad to extend Eid greetings in the coming days. He noted with satisfaction that the Syrian government has acknowledged that the Sheba'a Farms area, currently occupied by Israel, is Lebanese and not Syrian territory. He explained that the Syrians had wanted the statement that was issued after his visit to Damascus to include Sheba'a as part of the

liberation of the Golan from Israeli control, but the Lebanese had insisted on a separate reference to "the Lebanese Sheba'a". Syria agrees that Sheba'a is Lebanese, but the SARG doesn't want to demarcate the border of Sheba'a, Sleiman said.

POLITICS: THREE OPTIONS, AND I WILL WAIT TO DECIDE

10.(C) Turning to the Lebanese political scene, Ambassador asked Sleiman's views about the ongoing efforts to form an "independent" list of candidates (neither March 14 nor March 8) for the 2009 parliamentary elections, including whether he would attach his name to such a list. While he has said nothing publicly, clearly Sleiman had given the issue a good deal of thought. He is pleased there is progress on forming such a list, but said he will wait one-two months before deciding about lending his name to it. His quandary is that if he was seen as supporting some MP candidates and they lose, it would be "very bad" for his stature. Another issue: he does not have funds for campaigning, as the existing political blocs do, and has refused offers of financing so as to not be answerable to those who would provide it, Sleiman said.

¶11. (C) Sleiman presented two other interesting alternatives he is considering with regard to his role in the election and the next government. One is to obtain agreement that he can name one-third of the new ministers to be a moderating presence in the next government (a big jump from the current cabinet formed in July in which Sleiman named three of its 30 members). The other is to form a "president's bloc" in the new parliament after the election, rather than before, from among MPs who are victorious and open to allying with him or staying independent.

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OTHER ISSUES

¶12. (C) Sleiman was aware of the November 9-13 private visit of former President Carter and will host a dinner for Carter on December 10. He praised the selection of Senator Clinton as Secretary-designate, saying she has experience and knows the region.

COMMENT

¶13. (C) Sleiman's cautious approach about associating his name with a list of candidates at this point seems smart. Associating himself with a group of MPs after the election avoids the problem of lending his support to some candidates who do not win. The idea of naming one-third of the new cabinet is very ambitious. Sleiman met us alone and was very much at ease during this 40 minute meeting at Baabda on a quiet Saturday morning. He addressed with confidence the varying issues the Ambassador raised and more than once shooed away the aide who came in to try to remind him of his next appointment. End Comment.

SISON